

“Baptism: Renewal and Rebirth”

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Isaiah 42:1-9 + Matthew 3:13-17

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Baptism of the Lord

My message will be shorter than usual, because we've got a lot yet to do this morning, ordaining and installing our newest crop of Elders and Deacons. The primary theme for the day, in case it wasn't obvious, is *baptism*, and specifically, the Baptism of our Lord, that sacred moment when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus when he was baptized by John in the Jordan River when he was about 30 years old.

The baptism of Jesus is the first event in Jesus's life that is recorded in all four of the Gospels; it's the first event that all four of them think is significant enough to merit attention. We have absolutely no knowledge of Jesus's adult life prior to his baptism. What had he been doing, say, for the previous twelve years of his life? We know that Joseph was a carpenter, and it is very likely that Jesus was trained in that family craft. The evidence we have suggests that Joseph had died some while before Jesus was baptized, but it does seem highly probable that Jesus spent most of his adulthood doing carpentry.

And then ... something happened. Something compelled Jesus to head to the Jordan River. Something compelled Jesus towards the unconventional wilderness ministry of his cousin John. Like many other people, Jesus came to the waters of the Jordan, where John was inviting people to make a significant turn, to commit themselves to a life of greater righteousness. Does this suggest that Jesus was seeking a greater degree of righteousness in his *own* life? Did he, in any way, need to repent? What brought him to the waters of baptism at that particular time in his life? Some of you might say, “The Holy Spirit, of course.” And that may well be true, in some sense, but please also note that the Holy Spirit does not descend upon Jesus until he's already *in the water*, immediately after his baptism.

Matthew's account of the baptism is somewhat different from the others. Only in Matthew's Gospel do we get the curious interchange between John and Jesus: “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” John looks at Jesus and sees someone greater than he is; John feels that he should be the one receiving baptism by Jesus. But Jesus says to him: “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus *knew* that, for whatever reason, he *needed* to be baptized. This marks a significant turning point in his life. The Holy Spirit comes upon him, “descending like a dove and alighting on him,” and the Holy Spirit does not leave him until the moment when he dies on the cross: “Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last” – or, more literally, “Jesus cried again with a loud voice and *gave up the Spirit*.” (Matthew 27:50) In Greek, the word for “breath” is the same as the word for “spirit;” the meanings are interchangeable. Jesus gave up his breath – he died! – and Jesus also gave up his Spirit – the Holy Spirit of God.

Then, after his resurrection, Jesus gathers his eleven disciples upon a mountaintop in Galilee, where he gives them this instruction: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20) Thus begins the church’s ministry of *baptism*. Those eleven disciples go out and start teaching and healing in the name of Jesus, and baptism becomes the rite of initiation into the Christian faith. Initially they were just baptizing adults, but it did not take long before whole households were being baptized, including children. Baptism became, as we call it today, “a sign and seal of our cleansing, of our grafting into Christ, and of our welcome in the household of God.” Some branches of Christianity, as you all know, only baptize adults and children who are old enough to make a public profession of faith, but we – and many of the other historic branches of the Christian faith – continue to baptize people of *all* ages, recognizing the truth that the grace of God comes upon us *long* before we are able to respond to it. Right at the minute we have a number of children in this church who have not yet been baptized, who have not yet been officially welcomed into the community of faith. We can fix that! Parents, I invite you to come talk to me if you are interested.

There’s one more piece here we need to touch on: the voice. The voice that comes from the heavens when Jesus comes up out of the water and the Holy Spirit descends upon him, the voice that declares, to everybody who can hear, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This is the voice of God, declaring that this thirty-year-old man who has just been baptized is none other than the Son of God, the Beloved, the one whom God has Chosen. The fact that Jesus is the *Chosen One* recalls to mind that passage from Isaiah we read earlier: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” Note this, and note this well: Jesus Christ will bring forth *justice to the nations*. “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established *justice* in the earth.” “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” This is one of the missions of Jesus: to bring about *justice* on earth. He’s not just here to teach us morality. He’s not here just to teach us about what is right and what is wrong. He is also here to overthrow those things that exist in our society that need to be overthrown. To bring about justice. Justice for the unjustly oppressed. Justice to the nations.

It is good, and fitting, for us to remember our own baptism at least once a year, to recall that moment – even if we do not actually remember it – when we became a part of the community of faith. There were promises made that day, *vows*, that are as at least as sacred as wedding vows. Maybe you made them yourself, or maybe your parents made them on your behalf, and then later on you claimed them for your own when you were confirmed or joined a church in some other way. It is good for us to be reminded of those vows, as we did earlier in today’s service. They are pretty similar in all branches of the Christian faith. Our words are: “Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” (I do.) “Who is your Lord and Savior?” (Jesus Christ.) “Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his word and showing his love?” (I will, with God’s help.) These are our most sacred promises as Christians: to turn from the ways of sin – and we need to keep turning, again and again. To renounce evil and its power in the world – rejecting *all* the forces of darkness, whenever we find ourselves tempted to do evil, or whenever we find ourselves *complicit* with evil, including all societal and systemic forms of evil. To be a faithful disciple, that is, a faithful *student*, a faithful *learner*, always trying to learn *more* from the teachings of our Master. To obey his word, to actually *do* the things he wants us to do, and *not* do other things he doesn’t want us doing. And to show his love, to try, to the very best of our ability, to treat all other people with as much love as Jesus treats us. These are our vows, our sacred promises. These vows give us a sense of *identity* and *purpose*. *This* is who we are called to be. *This* is what it means to be a Christian.

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